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New Parliamentary T.V. channel

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New Parliamentary T.V. Channel

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December 1988



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION.....	1
THE PRESENT SERVICE.....	1
BACKGROUND.....	2
THE CPaC PROPOSAL.....	6
DISCUSSION.....	7
APPENDIX: SAMPLE SCHEDULES	



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NEW PARLIAMENTARY T.V. CHANNEL

INTRODUCTION

On 1 December 1988, CPaC -- a joint venture by the CBC and the Canadian cable industry -- filed an application with the CRTC to provide a new enhanced Parliamentary Channel offering parliamentary and public affairs programming during the broadcasting hours when the House is not sitting.

The Speaker of the House wrote to the Chairman of the CRTC, asking the Commission to delay the hearing set for 7 February 1989 "until the views of Members of the House of Commons can be made known to the Commission and the Commission has had an opportunity to consider them." In response, CPaC wrote to the CRTC requesting the hearing be delayed to allow time for consultation with the Speaker and the House. No new date for the hearing has been set.

THE PRESENT SERVICE

"An essential service"
"Will let the people know who is worth sending"
"At our house we call it 'Comedy Hour'"
"I'd rather watch Romper Room"

Such was the range of public opinion that the Edmonton cable company QCTV Ltd. found when it conducted a mail survey in 1978 of the newly televised House of Commons Proceedings. Sixty-one percent of the respondents had watched the new service, and 65% thought it ought to be continued. By contrast, a 1986 Environics Survey found that only 27% of its national sample watched the Parliamentary Channel frequently or occasionally.

Currently, the Proceedings of the House of Commons are available to over 95% of cabled households; 70% of all households have cable. The cable companies decide the slot for the Parliamentary Channel, with the current allocation being:

Channel Assignment of the Parliamentary Channel
by Canadian Cable Companies

CHANNEL ASSIGNMENT	# SYSTEMS	# HOUSEHOLDS REACHED
Channel 13 or under	103	558,094
Channel 14 - 30	234	3,003,023
Channel 31 - 36	60	2,350,743
Channel 37 and up	10	684,424
Total Canada	407	6,596,284

Source: Canadian Cable Television Association (Mediastats).

Whether an individual cabled household can receive the Parliamentary Channel depends on its particular equipment and the channel used by the local cable company. As 55% of TV households have VCRs and 65% have converters, the current service is widely available.

BACKGROUND

On 25 January 1977 the House passed the following motion:

That this House approves the radio and television broadcasting of its proceedings and of the proceedings of its committees on the basis of principles similar to those that govern the publication of the printed official reports of debates ...

(Canada, House of Commons, Debates, 24 January 1977, p. 2296.)

A Special Committee, chaired by the Speaker, was set up to implement the resolution. During the year the Special Committee supervised the alterations in the Chamber necessary to accommodate the control equipment, the camera placement, the lighting system and the improved audio system.

Originally, live coverage of the Commons proceedings was available only in the National Capital Region via microwave. Videotapes were shipped to the rest of the country. Individual cable companies had the choice of whether to carry this delayed coverage of the House or not. Some carried complete gavel-to-gavel proceedings, while those with less channel capacity carried only Question Period on their community channel.

When sufficient satellite capacity became available, in March 1979, the CBC began live nationwide distribution of the House of Commons Proceedings on the basis of a temporary network licence issued by the CRTC. The CRTC noted that the granting of this temporary licence did not prejudice a competing application by a consortium of cable operators, the Cable Satellite Network (CSN).

On 17 October 1980, the CRTC licensed the CBC to carry the House of Commons Proceedings, in both official languages, for two years. The Commission was not prepared at that time to permit the CBC to broadcast on-air discussion of the actual content of legislation, noting the difficulties of providing a reasonable, balanced opportunity for the expression of differing views, given the political considerations involved. In 1982, the CRTC renewed the CBC licence until 1987.

The Special Committee on the Reform of the House of Commons, better known as the McGrath Committee, reported in 1985. The Committee felt that the experience of televising Parliament had been positive and that previous fears about the effect of television on the House itself had proved unfounded. The Committee recommended that the House guidelines be revised and that House Committees be televised. With regard to the Parliamentary Network, the Committee wrote:

If our proposed changes result in more interesting television viewing, the next logical step is to improve the distribution network, which is not as dynamic or imaginative as it could be, and the program format. The present format for introducing each day's television broadcast was devised at a time when members were cautious about television in the House. By today's standards it is boring and restrictive. This is not the fault of the television hosts; they are confined by guidelines governing their broadcasts.

Admitting the cameras and producing an electronic Hansard distributed by a satellite and cable network was hailed as a significant step towards greater citizen involvement in the political life of Canada. These hopes have not been fully realized. The proceedings of the House are broadcast live, and the House timetable is such that most potential viewers are away from their television sets during the broadcast period. At the conclusion of the business of the House, question period is re-played. Then the transmission ceases; costly equipment and networks stand idle until the House resumes on the next sitting day. During summer and other adjournments the system remains dormant, with cable companies losing the use of a channel. This is a cause of annoyance to cable subscribers and a waste of valuable opportunity to provide information television.

An inexpensive alternative would be to repeat the proceedings of the House at times when a larger audience might tune in. Another would be to broadcast committee proceedings. A third option would be to transmit National Film Board productions. A fourth option is the concept of the American Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN), which provides full and inexpensive coverage of meetings, addresses, and phone-in programs on public affairs, as well as broadcasts of legislative proceedings.

The time has come to permit more scope for the person anchoring broadcasts of House proceedings. It should be possible to provide better explanations of House proceedings and contribute to increased understanding of the proceedings. To accomplish this it will be necessary to locate the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation anchor facilities in the Centre Block rather than at the present location, which is several kilometres from the House of Commons.

- 9.5 We recommend that the House of Commons provide on-site facilities for the parliamentary service of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and that fuller use be made of the parliamentary service.

(Canada, House of Commons, Report of the Special Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, June 1985, p. 54-5.)

The Task Force on Broadcasting Policy, better known as the Caplan-Sauvageau Task Force, agreed with the McGrath Committee, recommending in addition:

The cost of providing the Parliamentary Television Network should be borne by the Speaker of the House of Commons, with the Speaker responsible for determining the scope and nature of that service. The CBC should be compensated in full for continued use of its technical and human resources.

(Canada, Report of the Task Force on Broadcasting Policy, 1986, p. 316.)

The Caplan-Sauvageau Report was referred to the relevant House Committee, which endorsed this recommendation (see Canada, House of Commons, Minutes of the Standing Committee on Communications and Culture, Second Session of the Thirty-third Parliament, 36:56-9).

In 1987, the cable companies submitted an application to the CRTC to license a cable Public Affairs Channel, CPAC - note the capital "A". Recalling the Speaker's traditional position that the right to broadcast the proceedings of the House of Commons should not be exclusively assigned to any one broadcasting entity, CPAC intended to provide an alternative service to the CBC's gavel-to-gavel coverage. Outside the hours that the House was sitting CPAC proposed to show phone-ins, documentaries, and coverage of conferences, conventions and speeches, as well as background programs on Parliament and MPs.

The CPAC application was for an English-language specialty licence, to charge 15¢ per subscriber per month. CPAC was to be a non-profit company run by a 15-member Board. The Chairman and at least two other members of the Board would be prominent people, with no connection with the cable industry.

The CPAC application failed. The CRTC does not give reasons for turning down applicants, but it should be noted that the application was for a unilingual service, and that its acceptance would have resulted in the wasteful prospect of three satellite channels, one CPAC and two CBC/SRC, carrying the same video when the House was in session.

The cable industry and the CBC resumed negotiations, resulting in the application by CPaC - note the lower case "a".

THE CPaC PROPOSAL

The Canadian Parliamentary Channel/La chaîne parlementaire canadienne, CPaC, is a joint venture between the CBC and the cable industry to establish a non-profit company, Cableco.

CPaC proposes an 11-member Board of Directors (five CBC members, five Cableco nominees and a jointly nominated Chairman). There would be a Management Committee and a Programming Committee, each of which would be chaired by the Chairman of the Board and consist of two CBC nominees and two Cableco nominees. The General Manager of CPaC would be an ex-officio member of the Programming Committee. The operating expenses of Cableco are forecast to start at \$4.3 million rising to \$6.0 million, with CBC expenses of \$3.7 million in the first year. These are not large amounts by television standards; for example, it cost the CBC an average of \$72,700 for an hour of current and public affairs programming in 1984-85.

The first priority of CPaC would be the live coverage of the House of Commons in an unedited form without editorial comment but with hosts for procedural information. The CBC would continue to provide this service as at present.

Cableco would produce a number of programs related to Parliament and to the the broader political life of Canada:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <u>Private Members</u> | - a repeat of Private Members' business and profiles of individual members. |
| <u>On and Off the Hill</u> | - press conferences, Senate or Joint Committee Hearings (if available), Ministers' announcements and responses, Supreme Court decisions. |
| <u>Parliamentary Review</u> | - a detailed summary of legislative activities each weekend. |
| <u>Parliamentary Youth</u> | - a school-oriented program. |
| <u>Speaker's Corner</u> | - content to be decided by the Speaker of the House. |

- Luncheon Speakers - live or delayed coverage of such events as meetings of the Canadian Club.
- National Open Line - a show based on C-SPAN's successful show in the United States. The host would be neutral and the studio guests would be representatives of major points of view from government and opposition parties, or from appropriate interest groups.
- Event of the Day/Week - coverage of major events at provincial legislatures, conferences, conventions, public meetings, seminars and the best of community channel documentary programming. As examples, CPaC gives the United Church General Council, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Code Inquiry, the Gosset Inquiry, the Couchiching Conferences, the Canadian Bar Association Annual Meetings, the P.E.I. Fixed Link Inquiry and the International Conference on the Beluga Whale.
- The Parties - the political parties would be provided with free time to program as they saw fit.

When the House was not in session, CPaC would expand its coverage of those House activities that continue during the recess. The application does not mention what would happen during an election.

DISCUSSION

The CPaC application meets the need to make better use of the Parliamentary Channel, by filling in the blank time with public affairs programming. This objective was well recognized by the House, in particular by the McGrath Report. Parliament would still, of course, retain its right to set broadcast guidelines, and to decide whether to broadcast committee hearings.

The new service would have to meet the standard imposed by the Broadcasting Act to "provide reasonable, balanced opportunity for the expression of differing views on matters of public concern" (Broadcasting Act, s. 3(d)). Some interpretation of the Act would be necessary to decide exactly how such a balanced opportunity would be achieved, but phone-in shows would probably have to include outside guests when the range of

parliamentary opinion was much narrower than the range of public opinion in the country as a whole. Recent issues where this was the case are the Meech Lake Accord and the Official Languages Act.

The present Parliamentary Channel is available free of charge to cable subscribers, with the CBC allocating funds from its appropriation to pay for cameras, people and satellite charges. Under the CPaC proposal, the CBC would still pay for the House camera equipment and associated staff and for the 24 hours-a-day satellite costs. The monthly subscriber fee of 8¢, increasing to 10¢ per month over five years, would fund the new programming produced by CPaC. Each cable company would decide for itself whether to carry CPaC. The new service projects 4.8 million subscribers at first, rising to 6 million in the second year, with CPaC assuming that nearly all systems currently taking the free service would take the new service.

From a logical point of view, it is hard to justify the CPaC proposal's allocation of costs and responsibilities as anything but an unsatisfactory compromise. The public purse would fund the CBC to televise the Chamber and rent the satellite channels. The cable companies would be reimbursed for the costs of producing the enhanced programming. The viewer would not continue to receive what was previously free, but would have to buy a new package, though at an admittedly moderate cost. One could argue that either CPaC ought to be totally funded by government appropriations and be freely available as a public service, or that the user ought to pay for services received. The CPaC proposal falls between these two stools. Is the proposed fee adequate to ensure either the best penetration or the best enhanced programming?

If there is to be a public component in the financing of this service, why should it be delivered through the CBC? The more appropriate procedure would be to vote the money to the House of Commons, much like the funding for the printed Hansard, and then have the Speaker contract with the CBC or whomever he decided upon. Apart from improving visibility and accountability, such a process would save the CBC from having to make invidious resource decisions between the Parliamentary Channel and its own mandated services.

The corporate structure of CPaC has the Board and its Committees evenly divided between CBC and Cableco nominees with the deciding vote in the hands of the jointly-nominated Chairman. One wonders why such a delicate balancing act is necessary. The two sides of the CPaC do bring very different abilities and responsibilities to the partnership; the CBC is in essence a common carrier of the House of Commons proceedings with no editorial responsibilities, while Cableco would produce the additional enhanced programming. Whoever made the programming decisions for CPaC would have to adhere to the Broadcasting Act in terms of balance and standards. The CBC has interpreted the Act in its own way; for example, it has refused to broadcast certain NFB documentaries, e.g., Morgentaler or If You Love This Planet, on the grounds of bias, and to employ as visible journalists, prominent unionists or the spouses of Crown corporation appointees. Would these CBC policies automatically be imposed on CPaC because of its corporate structure, and might deadlock be the natural state of the CPaC Board and its Committees? One might also note parenthetically the many years it has taken the CBC and Cableco to compromise enough to produce this application. Perhaps the public interest might be better served by having independent members on the Board, possibly appointed by the House or the Speaker.

APPENDIX

SAMPLE SCHEDULE THE HOUSE IN SESSION

E.S.T.	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	P.S.T.	
8 a.m.	EVENTS OF THE WEEK	ON AND OFF THE HILL (R)					EVENTS OF THE WEEK	3 a.m.	
9 a.m.		PRIVATE MEMBERS						6 a.m.	
		PARLIAMENTARY YOUTH							
NOON		PARLIAMENTARY REVIEW	PROCEEDINGS OF THE H.O.C.			THE PARTIES	PROCEEDINGS OF THE H.O.C.	QUESTION PERIOD	9 a.m.
	EVENTS OF THE WEEK	LUNCHEON SPEAKERS			PROCEEDINGS OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS		EVENTS OF THE WEEK	NOON	
QUESTION PERIOD									
3 p.m.		PROCEEDINGS OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS			EVENT OF THE DAY				
m.	SPEAKER'S CORNER	SPEAKER'S CORNER				PARLIAMENTARY REVIEW	3 p.m.		
6 p.m.	DOCS. AND OPEN LINE	EVENT OF THE DAY					EVENTS OF THE WEEK	6 p.m.	
		QUESTION PERIOD (R)							
		NATIONAL OPEN LINE							
MID-NIGHT	EVENTS OF THE WEEK	THE PARTIES (R)			ON AND OFF THE HILL				MID-NIGHT
		QUESTION PERIOD (R)							
3 a.m.		PROCEEDINGS OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS (R)							

HORAIRE MODÈLE – LA CHAMBRE EN ACTIVITÉ

H.N.E.	DIMANCHE	LUNDI	MARDI	MERCREDI	JEUDI	VENREDI	SAMEDI	H.N.P.	
06h00	LES ÉVÉNEMENTS DE LA SEMAINE	SUR LA COLLINE ET AILLEURS... (R)					LES ÉVÉNEMENTS DE LA SEMAINE	03h00	
09h00		L'HEURE DES DÉPUTÉS						06h00	
		LES JEUNES ET LE PARLEMENT							
		TRAVAUX DE LA C. d. C.	LES PARTIS POLITIQUES	TRAVAUX DE LA C. d. C.	LA PÉRIODE DES QUESTIONS				
MIDI	LA REVUE PARLEMENTAIRE	LA TRIBUNE DE MIDI				TRAVAUX DE LA CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES	LES ÉVÉNEMENTS DE LA SEMAINE	09h00	
	LES ÉVÉNEMENTS DE LA SEMAINE	LA PÉRIODE DES QUESTIONS						L'ÉVÉNEMENT DU JOUR	MIDI
15h00		TRAVAUX DE LA CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES							
18h00	LA RUBRIQUE DU PRÉSIDENT	LA RUBRIQUE DU PRÉSIDENT				LA REVUE PARLEMENTAIRE	15h00		
	DOCU- MENTAIRES ET LA PAROLE EST À VOUS	L'ÉVÉNEMENT DU JOUR							
		LA PÉRIODE DES QUESTIONS (R)						18h00	
21h00		LA PAROLE EST À VOUS							LES PARTIS POLITIQUES (R)
	LES PARTIS POLITIQUES (R)	SUR LA COLLINE ET AILLEURS...				LES ÉVÉNEMENTS DE LA SEMAINE	21h00		
MINUIT	LES ÉVÉNEMENTS DE LA SEMAINE	LA PÉRIODE DES QUESTIONS (R)							
		TRAVAUX DE LA CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES (R)						MINUIT	
03h00									



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